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Chair

Mr. Robert Oliphant

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● (1500)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.)): I'm calling to order the 119th meeting of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we are studying the impact of irregular crossing of Canada's southern border. It's our third meeting for this study.

Thank you to the witnesses for agreeing to appear before us on quite short notice.

In this section, we have two organizations appearing and then three individuals. The three individuals will be sharing seven minutes of time. If anybody is wondering about that is working, we were able to accede to a request to have three people appear but as one witness.

[*Translation*]

We're going to start with Stephan Reichhold, the director general of the Table de concertation des organismes au service des personnes réfugiées et immigrantes.

Thank you for being here, Mr. Reichhold. You have seven minutes.

Mr. Stephan Reichhold (Director General, Table de concertation des organismes au service des personnes réfugiées et immigrantes): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for the invitation to appear before you.

My name is Stephan Reichhold. I am the director general of the Table de concertation des organismes au service des personnes réfugiées et immigrantes, which brings together 140 organizations in Quebec that work with refugees, immigrants and undocumented migrants.

I will paint a picture of the situation. Quebec is often mentioned in this committee's discussions, but I get the impression that not everyone knows exactly how it works in Quebec. This province does things very differently than the rest of Canada when it comes to refugee claimants. So I'm going to quickly explain how it works.

According to the system that has been in place since the 1980s, the first responders, after the admissibility process of the Canada Border Services Agency or IRCC, are Quebec's social services. Refugee claimants are therefore referred to the Quebec Ministry of Health and Social Services, which receives them and offers them social services. The ministry is responsible for everything related to temporary accommodation.

The steps taken by refugee claimants are as follows. Whether they entered the country in a regular or irregular way, whether it was through the Roxham Road or directly through Lacolle, it makes absolutely no difference. They spend a few hours completing security and admissibility formalities. The agency then takes them by bus to Montreal and drops them off directly in front of one of the four temporary accommodation centres. One of these centres, the YMCA, has been in existence for 30 years, but the others were set up last summer following the arrival of more refugee claimants.

Often, these claimants and their children stay in the temporary accommodation for two or three weeks, the time it takes to receive their first social assistance cheque, which takes an average of two weeks. Once they have received their social assistance cheque, they are directed to one of the 12 settlement NGOs in the Montreal area. Their mandate is to find housing for the claimants. These organizations are funded to find housing for them, to guide them and to help them in their efforts to settle outside Montreal.

So there is a big turnover. Currently, there are between 800 and 900 people in temporary accommodation centres. Tomorrow, maybe 100 people will leave these centres and 50 more will arrive. This turnover ensures that a presence in temporary accommodation can be maintained in a fairly controlled manner.

The housing situation in Quebec is certainly not comparable to that in Toronto. It seems obvious and easy, but it's still quite complicated. This works relatively well because all stakeholders work closely together: CBSA, IRCC, IRB, Service Canada, the City of Montreal, Red Cross, UNHCR and others.

We meet every six to eight weeks. Together, we take stock of what has been done and what is coming. We get ready and try to address the problems and the missing links in the system. We can say that it is fluid and that it can adapt to a larger volume of refugee claimants.

As Mr. Fortin said, currently between 40 and 50 new people arrive every day, which is still very manageable. If the numbers were double that, it would be quite manageable as well.

I will give you some interesting figures, because there aren't many statistics on who these people are, on their profile, and so on.

Two organizations sent me their statistics, including the Centre d'appui aux communautés immigrantes, or CACI, in Montreal. Last year, CACI provided services to 1,700 refugee claimants, mainly from Haiti, Nigeria, Syria and Congo. The educational profile of these individuals is as follows: 43% have a university degree and 27% have a college diploma. This means that about 70% of these people are highly educated. Of these 1,700 refugee claimants, 40% were receiving social assistance. The others had jobs or other sources of income.

● (1505)

La Maison d'Haïti met with 6,172 refugee claimants and assisted them with housing, work permits, and so on. Of these 6,172 claimants, 2,344 reported that they were employed. We find that in Quebec—and we would like to have more data on this—the majority of refugee claimants who arrived in recent months are employed, which is good news.

I'm not saying that it's easy, but we are seeing a phenomenon that we were not aware of before, namely that many companies in the regions are recruiting refugee claimants who are in Montreal. Representatives of these companies come to agencies for a day, interview refugee claimants and offer them work. We are talking about regions such as the Eastern Townships, Chaudière-Appalaches and Mauricie. At present, hundreds or even thousands of refugee claimants have been recruited by companies that take care of them, find them accommodation and sometimes even bring their families. Since these companies act independently, we are not sure how things work. Again, it would be interesting to document all this.

In addition, a multitude of citizens' initiatives have been launched since last summer. For example, TD Group and Team Spectra, which includes the Festival International de Jazz de Montréal among its achievements, have provided significant amounts of money to, among other things, provide activities for children in temporary accommodation centres. Many citizens participate in these initiatives. I'm not talking about donations.

Of course, resources are a challenge, but as you know, community organizations are very creative. We manage to find resources. Centraide is a major financial player. There is also the private sector and fundraising, among others. In the face of the desire to do things right and to treat people with dignity, negative messages are still the most important obstacle. That is what we fear most. The remarks we've heard, even here around this table—

● (1510)

The Chair: You have a few seconds left.

Mr. Stephan Reichhold: My time is up?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Stephan Reichhold: I could answer your questions if you want to know more about how things are done in Quebec.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

Ms. Casipullai.

Ms. Amy Casipullai (Senior Coordinator, Policy and Communications, Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants): Thank you, Chair.

Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee on this important topic.

OCASI, the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, has 232 member agencies across the province, and much as my friend here does, our member agencies assist immigrants, refugees, and refugee claimants. Historically the number of people making claims has gone up and down. Currently we are seeing a higher than usual number of claimants in Ontario, and this is causing a higher than usual draw on services and supports.

Ontario also receives refugee claimants who have entered and made a claim in another province. This is also not new and it's a trend that's not limited to refugee claimants. The Toronto Shelter Network says that refugee claimants currently make up about 45% of the people in the shelter system, but it's hard to say how they arrived and whether they arrived irregularly or at a port of entry since I'm told that the shelters don't really ask for that information—nor is there a need to do that. We should also keep in mind that not all refugee claimants seek out emergency shelter or services.

The shortage of emergency shelters in various municipalities and the shortage of affordable housing are long-standing needs and are not caused by refugee claimants. So if there's a crisis, it's the lack of affordable and adequate housing, resulting in bottlenecks in emergency shelters in many municipalities, including Toronto. The backlog in the shelters is due partly to the fact that in the past refugee claimants would stay only a few weeks and then move out into housing, but now it takes longer. One estimate from Toronto is that it is for about three to six months, which is creating a backlog, and that's because there just isn't enough affordable housing.

The City of Toronto together with community service organizations is working on short-term and long-term capacity plans to deal with the refugee housing situation. Leaders of local refugee shelters are working alongside city officials to formulate the long-term plan, which, if funded sufficiently, could have a huge impact on dealing with the current challenges. My colleague Anne Woolger can elaborate on that situation, but it should also be noted that not all claimants seek shelter.

Claimants are not eligible for all services, unlike other immigrants or refugees, and our member agencies continue to do some terrific work as they've done for many years to find the resources and collaborations to deliver services that claimants need. Historically all levels of government—federal, provincial, and municipal—have worked well together with community service organizations to welcome and support refugee claimants and other newcomers. It's important for that collaboration to continue so that there's a plan and that services are harmonized across regions and across all governments, and so that all governments continue to benefit from the contributions that refugee claimants make.

Finally, like our colleague, we are concerned about the growing anti-refugee sentiment, and it's important for us that our leaders and media are careful to not use inflammatory or alarmist language with respect to refugee claimants. I will end there and I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Very good. Thank you very much.

For the other three, we'll begin with Ms. Woolger.

It's nice to see you again.

Ms. Anne Woolger (Founding Director, Matthew House, Toronto): Thank you.

My name is Anne Woolger, and I'm the founder of Matthew House, Toronto, a group of homes that welcomes, shelters, and supports refugee claimants. For the past 30 years, working individually and with dedicated staff and volunteers, I've helped with the resettlement of close to 4,000 refugees. During those years, many painful stories drove me to tears as refugees told me of loved ones killed before their eyes, of being gang-raped, of receiving death threats against them and their children. I've seen torture marks and scars on people's bodies, like the African woman who showed me wounds from bullets that had grazed her stomach before they killed her husband and son. Hence, when I hear media reports portraying these same people as illegal, bogus, and queue jumpers, it both angers me and breaks my heart.

As a nation, we must respect our international obligations so that those fleeing for their lives may enter without hindrance. Our refugee status determination system is second to none, assessing each case fairly and ensuring protection for those who need it. I can also attest that in spite of all their hardships, refugee claimants are highly motivated and resilient people who are often well educated and entrepreneurial, eager to give back to the country that welcomed and protected them.

I could share hundreds of success stories of refugee claimants. One is that of Ben from Afghanistan, who came alone to Canada three years ago at the age of 16. Last month, not only did he graduate from his high school with top honours, but he was also voted class valedictorian. During his valedictory address, he shared his story of fleeing for his life and described the moment he set foot on Canadian soil as being exciting, yet terrifying. Thankfully, he has been granted refugee protection. He concluded his speech by quoting Martin Luther King, encouraging his classmates to believe in their own dignity, to do their very best, and to commit themselves to the eternal principles of beauty, love and justice.

Ben is but one example of the kind of people crossing our border today. I can assure you that in supporting these people with love and justice, the return on investment will be enormous, and all of Canada will benefit.

Thank you.

● (1515)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Neve, welcome back.

Mr. Alex Neve (Secretary General, Amnesty International Canada): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Amnesty International certainly welcomes the opportunity to appear as part of this study on irregular crossings of the Canada-U.S. border, a situation that absolutely must be understood from a human rights perspective. We do not agree that the situation along the border constitutes a crisis by any measure. The numbers are well within Canada's capacity, and also its responsibility to respond to, and certainly do not come close to approaching a sense of crisis when considered in a global context.

That said, the numbers are clearly higher than in years past, and there are two primary reasons. First, there has been a rapid deterioration in respect for the rights of refugee claimants, refugees, and migrants in the United States since Donald Trump assumed the presidency. As such, it is not at all surprising that a growing number of refugee claimants in the United States do not feel safe, do not feel confident that their claims for asylum will be dealt with fairly under the U.S. system, and have instead sought to cross into Canada to seek protection.

A 2007 Federal Court ruling documented the many ways that refugee protection in the United States failed to meet the safe third country agreement's required standards of safety. While that decision was reversed by the Federal Court of Appeal on jurisdictional and other legal grounds, the factual findings about grave problems in the U.S. asylum system remained undisturbed.

Today, more than a decade later, those concerns have mounted dramatically, including numerous procedural barriers to making asylum claims, restrictive interpretations of the refugee definition, limits on women advancing gender-based claims, bars on making claims after one year, difficulties in obtaining legal counsel, and extensive arbitrary lengthy and abusive immigration detention. Most recently there is the impact of what has come to be known as the Muslim ban and the refugee ban, toxic rhetoric associated with Donald Trump's intended border wall, and cruel measures targeting children and families for mandatory detention.

The second key element, of course, is that the Canada-U.S. safe third country agreement makes it nearly impossible for refugee claimants in the United States to seek protection at an official Canadian border post. Unless they come within a limited number of exceptions to the agreement, the only way they are able to access the Canadian refugee determination system is to cross the border irregularly and make a claim inside Canada. That has led many individuals to make dangerous journeys into Canada, including in harsh winter conditions.

We emphatically stress that these irregular crossings to make refugee claims are neither illegal under international law nor Canadian law. This is why Amnesty International has called for the safe third country agreement to be suspended. When it became clear that the government was not prepared to take that step, we joined with the Canadian Council for Refugees and the Canadian Council of Churches in launching a Federal Court application last July. Full hearings are set for this coming January, but suspending the safe third country agreement now would send a strong message that Canada is concerned about the deteriorating regard for the rights of refugees in the United States and is committed to ensuring that the application of the safe third country agreement is fully consistent with our international human rights obligations. Finally, it would also bring a greater sense of order and oversight to border crossings by encouraging individuals to instead make their claims at official border posts.

Thank you.

● (1520)

The Chair: Thank you very much. You're always able to stretch the time a bit. You have committee appearances down to an art. Luckily OCASI took less time.

Mr. Alex Neve: It was all planned.

The Chair: Very well planned.

Mr. Mohammed, welcome. It's good to see you again.

Mr. Seidu Mohammed (As an Individual): Good afternoon. I am honoured to be here today.

As a newcomer to Canada, I would like to begin by recognizing that here in Ottawa I am on the traditional territory of the Algonquin and Anishinabe people.

I am here to talk about refugees and immigrants. I am also here to say thank you to the people of Canada for saving me—for saving my life from certain death by lynching by homophobic mobs in Ghana and saving me from imprisonment by Ghanaian police for the crime of homosexuality. Here, perhaps, the hate-mongers in Canada may think I am a criminal, but is it truly a crime to be my authentic self and embrace my sexual orientation?

I am a person who has experienced how refugees and immigrants are struggling and seeking a better life. I travelled through nine countries by plane, bus, boat, and on foot. I walked through dangerous jungles, where I saw dead people who also had been trying to make it to a different country where they could be safe. In the middle of the night, my friend died from thirst and hunger right beside me. I was also robbed and attacked by a group of armed men and women.

I went to the United States thinking it was a country that protected and kept refugees safe. I was wrong. I was jailed and in detention for nine months with murderers, drug dealers, and people who have committed felonies. In detention I was not provided a lawyer for my bond hearing or my asylum hearing at the United States immigration court. The court required me to pay a very high $28,000 bond for me to be conditionally released from detention. My brother had to pay that bond.

I was required to report every two weeks to an ICE officer, who harassed me for documents and constantly threatened me with deportation. I felt very afraid, because at that time the U.S. was deporting people. So, like many other refugees, I fled from the U.S.A., where I was not safe, to Canada, where I would be safe. On December 24, 2016, I and my friend Razak Iyal walked for 10 hours in the cold across the border near Emerson, Manitoba. On that fateful night, we both suffered severe frostbite, resulting in the loss of our fingers. We would have lost our lives had it not been for a good Canadian Samaritan named Franco. He stopped on the side of the road to save us from the cold and called 911. Many Canadians have helped us and other refugees since we have come to Canada.

I want the people of this great country called Canada to know that refugees and immigrants are not criminals or economic migrants. There is another misconception that refugee protection is granted very easily in Canada. The refugee claim hearing in Canada is not an easy process. An IRB member from Calgary, Alberta, grilled me for over three hours and did not give me a decision for another two months after the hearing. It was a tough process and it is still a tough process.

Refugees are people who are coming to this country seeking protection and safety. Also, we want to live in a home where we can feel safe from homophobic people and mobs. Refugees and immigrants are also here to follow the laws of this country, so we want Canadian people to please protect us, with hope and courage, and tell us "You are safe here".

I would like to thank Legal Aid Manitoba for giving me free counsel. Mr. Bashir Khan, a really good Winnipeg refugee lawyer, visited me in the hospital many times, sat beside my bed, and completed my refugee application. He always visited me at my residence, and worked very hard to prepare me for my refugee claim hearing.

I am very, very grateful to the Canadian health care system for what they did for me and my friend. Without them, I wouldn't be here now.

Thank you.

● (1525)

The Chair: Thank you.

Madame Mendès.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès (Brossard—Saint-Lambert, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

Thank you very much, Mr. Mohammed. It's always hard to hear stories like yours, but I am glad you're in Canada.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Reichhold, my questions are for you, since we've known each another for a very long time. We worked together for several years. At the time, I was the director of an immigrant and refugee reception and settlement agency that was a member of the Table.

I really liked the review you gave on the structure of Quebec and how we have succeeded, in Quebec, in establishing mechanisms that work. We tried things on a trial and error basis and made adjustments.

Today, I believe that Quebec's system is indeed capable of adjusting to the influx of migrants or claimants who appeal to our compassion and openness.

We have fought some of these battles together, and if I may, I would like to go back to the beginning.

In Quebec, the first large influxes of refugees occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Romanians were arriving in containers, and we heard horror stories at that time.

In its early days, the Table advocated the need for concerted action by all levels of government. We knew very well that refugee claimants fell under federal jurisdiction. The provincial government, for its part, was responsible for providing social services.

How did we get here? I would like to prove here that this isn't just a matter of government—

Mr. Stephan Reichhold: That was a long time ago.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: Absolutely.

Mr. Stephan Reichhold: The situation we experienced in 2017 was not new. These types of situations were experienced in 1990-91 and 2001-02. There were several large influxes of refugee claimants, which everyone ended up sort of forgetting about. The majority of these people who came to Canada stayed and integrated very well, and probably will this time as well. Yes, there is pressure, but for us, talking about a crisis is nonsense because it isn't a crisis situation.

In Quebec, the recipe, and I wouldn't call it magic, is that the various levels of government have always worked very closely together, whether it be the Quebec immigration department, CIC at the time, which is now IRCC, CBSA or the City of Montreal, which now has an office for newcomers.

We are in constant and almost daily communication with all these people. We support each other. The communication of information between all these people works extremely well. That's what makes it happen.

There are particular challenges. The first thing we do is get together to determine who does what, when and with what resources. It sounds a little naive, but it's real. At the regional level, a joint committee has existed for 27 years, made up of representatives of NGOs from Montreal and IRCC. This committee is still alive, and it continues to meet every three months. We have dealt with a lot of crises through this committee. That is the solution I am suggesting to my colleagues in Ontario. They need to communicate better with each other.

[*English*]

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: Exactly. It's a very good segue to Ms. Casipullai.

I want to ask whether you have the same kind of collaboration in Ontario with the different levels of government. I almost know the answer, but I just want to have it on the record. It has worked very well in Quebec. Having been there, knowing how it works, I certainly believe it is something we could share with other provinces.

● (1530)

Ms. Amy Casipullai: The Quebec model sounds very intriguing. We don't have something similar in Ontario, no, but I guess I should also say that the Quebec government's relationship with the federal government with respect to immigration is very different and unique in Canada, compared with what other provinces and territories have. That's all I can say at this point.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: Are you talking in terms of jurisdiction?

Ms. Amy Casipullai: It's also in terms of how the services are funded in Quebec. The transfer payments work differently. I should probably let Stephan explain that. For example, the Canada–Ontario Immigration Agreement is administered very differently. The relationship between Ontario and the federal government is very different when it comes to funding settlement services, for example. But even in terms of collaboration around planning, it's a very different relationship that Ontario has. We don't have the same model.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: Would you have something to add to that, Ms. Woolger, because you do provide emergency shelter?

Ms. Anne Woolger: I would agree that we don't have the same model as Montreal. In fact, we were speaking the other day and I was also feeling a bit envious. I think it's something that we could aspire to, and I would love to do that. Yes, it's always been the case that there's no direct support, particularly for refugee claimant shelters, in Ontario from any level of government except the municipal government, where it's just a matter of homelessness—their homeless category. Unfortunately, there are just not enough decent and appropriate shelters specifically for refugee claimants. That is actually why I became the founder of Matthew House, a private charity, because there is that kind of need.

I'm feeling encouraged, I must say. I know everyone seems kind of depressed right now, but I'm feeling encouraged. Actually from my perspective, I sometimes felt like a voice crying in the wilderness; and now I'm feeling like, oh, all the different levels of government are sort of waking up and realizing, hey, maybe these people actually would benefit from our support with shelter and housing, because in the long run everyone benefits. Refugee claimants are such wonderful contributors to society, and so everyone wins the better we work together. I see this as a huge opportunity, actually.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Mendès.

I don't think we're depressed. I think what we are reflecting on is the great privilege that it is to be members of Parliament and to hear stories both from a refugee claimant and from those who are working to make our country better. I think that's what you're hearing: not depression, but maybe a little bit of calmness.

Ms. Rempel.

Hon. Michelle Rempel (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to express my thanks to all of you for the work that you do to protect the world's most vulnerable.

By way of sharing a story, two summers ago we were sitting in the immigration committee in the middle of the summer. This seems to be a trend. The reason was that shortly after the last federal election, when I was appointed as opposition shadow minister for Citizenship and Immigration, a man had come to meet with me and what he said in my office changed my life. He told me about some of his relatives who had been in captivity and had been forced to eat their children who were boiled in front of them. He was a member of the Yazidi community. About two weeks later, I had an opportunity to meet with Nadia Murad, who was not really well known to the world yet. I had never before sat with someone who had been through that type of trauma. I just remember feeling, even just talking about it, the sense that we needed to do something, as well as anger and disgust. We needed to do something. We had meetings during the summer. We pushed a motion through in the House of Commons. From there, this committee pushed subsequent studies. I pushed a subsequent study because I knew that these women weren't getting adequate support when they came to Canada, that they had experienced extreme trauma. It was not so much about the condemnation but about an opportunity for us to change our processes to get this right.

I'm very proud of that work, because it reflects the fact that one of the special things about Canada is that we are not discussing "if" we should have immigration, but "how". I fully believe that we have a responsibility to protect the world's most vulnerable, and it's an important one. I think that Canada also has a role to be an advocate for change that instills those concepts to improve global asylum processes. When I criticize the United Nations it's because I don't understand why those women were not in the UN selection process. Our committee was just in Uganda and we met with members of the LGBT community. There is not one person here who wasn't deeply affected by that meeting. This is why we moved a motion in the House of Commons to extend the rainbow RAP program and make it permanent. I think it's about how. Where I would like to see this debate go is to really asking how.

Ms. Woolger, the comment that you just made was that you were encouraged to see support for long-term integration, because when we invest in the integration of humanitarian immigrants, they have a better experience in Canada and their potential is unlocked. I'm the first person who will admit that somebody who is coming to Canada, who has escaped persecution, has trauma to overcome. They're in a new country. They have challenges to overcome before we can even start talking about English language training—or French language training, *pardon*. I'm from Alberta.

To me that is where we've kind of lost the dialogue in the last 18 months. That is my concern. When we're asking questions about how we're going to pay for this, it's not out of a pejorative place; it's from a place that we can't lose the narrative and we can't just say that our obligation ends when somebody crosses the border. This is why we have to ask how. We had meetings in Uganda with very senior officials from the government, and I was very struck to hear the Government of Uganda say they don't expect the world to resettle everybody who's here. We can't. So the question is how, and what do we do, and how do we intervene with aid? I think where we've lost the narrative is that I cannot accept that we have 800 people in college dormitories with no plan to house them. I can't accept that we don't have some sort of projection or plan on the needs that people have. I can't accept that we're not talking about how to budget this. As a parliamentarian I can't accept that I can't scrutinize budgetary figures as a result of Canada's treating this in a piecemeal solution, because that is not compassionate.

● (1535)

What's been very, very disappointing to me, as somebody who has advocated for refugees and the world's most vulnerable in this country, is to watch this debate go into one about.... Do you know what it's like to read articles about being called racist, after I've done this for the last two years? It's not about me; I don't want the debate to go there. I want the debate to go back to the "how". We've lost that narrative. That's why we called these meetings this summer.

This is why I would like to see a report come out of this study. We might disagree on how, but we can't shy away from that debate. We can't shy away from looking at article 31 of the refugee convention. When it was put in place, France wanted to make sure there wasn't the capacity for asylum claim shopping. Does that still apply in today's global context? I would argue yes, but under what circumstances? Are the review criteria for the safe third country agreement still valid? The government argues yes; others will argue no; but we're not even having that discussion right now. It's just nothing. Then there are 800 people; I don't know where they're going to go in a week. Sadly, after six hours of meetings, I don't feel any more enlightened. But I would encourage my colleagues, especially after hearing the testimony that we had here, that we get back to the how.

I will ask a very simple question of you at the end of my time. We might disagree on how, but after your testimony and after what's happened here today, would it be useful if this committee tabled a report with the House of Commons and asked the government for an official response?

● (1540)

The Chair: You have 10 seconds to all respond.

That's your seven minutes.

Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank all the witnesses for being here with us today.

In particular, I just want to highlight you, Mr. Mohammed, for your bravery, the fact that you made a journey to get to safety. Your life matters and it should be valued, and I'm so glad that Canada valued your life in granting your asylum claim.

Now what we've heard, of course, and what I know in my heart, is that you didn't have to go through the risks that you took in crossing from the United States to Manitoba, that you didn't have to risk losing your fingers, right? If we actually suspended the safe third country agreement, you might have actually crossed over at an official point of entry, and therefore not risked your life and seen your friend and others go through the same experience.

From that perspective, that's why I'm calling for the suspension of the safe third country agreement. Would you, as somebody whose experienced this journey yourself, call on the Canadian government to suspend the safe third country agreement?

Mr. Seidu Mohammed: Yes, I would like that to be done, because as you said, it wasn't safe for us, the immigrants. If it were safe, we could go through the border and ask to seek for asylum, and the process would start from there. But we didn't. The way the agreement went, that's why we sneaked in and came in, because we didn't want to go to the border for them to take us back to the United States, which we are very afraid of. Making that journey was very, very hard because we couldn't have imagined.... We didn't know we are going to survive that kind of journey, because for 10 hours in the cold at least you are already gone. But the safe third country agreement, that's what causes a lot of damage to most refugees and immigrants, so we would like it to be suspended.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

We've heard that from Mr. Neve, and I think we've also heard that from Ms. Woolger as well, on the suspension of the safe third country agreement, if I could just get a quick answer in the affirmative.

Ms. Anne Woolger: Absolutely.

I will just say that, because I have worked 30 years with refugees, for half of my career there was no safe third country agreement, and I would have to say that things worked so much more smoothly. Everyone just came to the border. It was in everyone's best interests to present themselves in an orderly fashion. They were properly screened. They were properly processed. Nobody would want to go to an irregular point. Why would they? It was safer, more secure, more efficient, and made much more sense.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Mr. Alex Neve: If I could echo that, I made the case as to why, from a human rights perspective in Amnesty International's view and many others', it's vital that the agreement be suspended. This is because by no measure does refugee protection in the United States meet the required standards of the agreement, or international standards.

I think this other point, that there's also a border management argument to be made as to why suspending the agreement makes sense, to bring back a sense of orderliness and oversight to how refugee claims are handled at the border, is in that interest as well.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I have two other areas I want to address, and I know I'm going to run out of time very quickly.

I know that some people argue it's semantics, using the word "illegal" versus "irregular". From my perspective, it is not semantics. It is what the law itself says. The law is very specific about it. It says that when a person comes through regular or irregular crossings to seek asylum, they are actually doing it per Canadian law in accordance with section 133 of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act.

We just heard Ms. Rempel make a very moving speech about wanting to move forward with a plan. Would the plan also incorporate using the right terminology and stop casting the view that asylum seekers are somehow illegal? Is that not an important component of the plan?

● (1545)

Mr. Alex Neve: Whether it's a plan, whether it's just the statements that government ministers, officials, journalists, any and all of us make, I think it is absolutely incumbent upon all of us to stop using the word "illegal" to refer to individuals who cross borders to make refugee claims. We see that around the world, and it is a toxic trend that is undermining public support for refugee protection. It is creating an undue sense of alarm and hysteria about refugees and the threats they pose. As you have highlighted, it is completely groundless in law, and we need to banish it from our vocabulary.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I'm going to move to the housing piece.

Thank you, Ms. Woolger, for your 30 years of experience and sharing that piece with us, to say that when we didn't have the safe third country agreement, there was actually order to border crossings. Maybe we need to get back to that.

We're now talking about sheltering people by renting hotel rooms. Would it not make sense for the government to invest the tens of millions of dollars in getting a permanent structure or multiple permanent structures to support asylum seekers in this regard? I'd like to hear your thoughts on that.

Ms. Anne Woolger: Yes, it certainly would.

I just want to say that as a shelter leader from Toronto, there's a coalition of shelter leaders that has been meeting with the City of Toronto. We've put together a long-term refugee capacity plan because of our knowledge of the people and the needs, and the City of Toronto is very open to it. We see that it truly could be very effective. We're just trusting that there will be funds available.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: We heard from the parliamentary secretary, Mr. Vaughan, that there is apparently... although he won't tell us how much is being set aside and how much is being offered. But I'm going to call him to task. I hope the committee will call him to task to actually fork up that money.

To that end, in regard to the plan you're working on with your colleagues, is there something you can table for this committee to look at?

Ms. Anne Woolger: I think I would have to confirm with the officials at the City of Toronto, because we're working on it together. I would certainly be willing to ask.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: It would be very useful, I think, if we could obtain that plan.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Damoff, for seven minutes.

Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I'd like to thank all of our witnesses, but in particular Mr. Mohammed. I want to thank you for being here with us and sharing a story that no doubt is difficult to tell, but it's an important one. I just want to thank you and welcome you to Canada.

I do have a couple of questions, but we're winding up close to five hours of hearings now. The Liberal members of this committee welcomed the opportunity to be here today to listen to testimony. I think it's important to remember that all of these hearings are public and that the transcripts will be available. In terms of a report, any report that we do won't be tabled until October anyway.

Unfortunately, Ms. Rempel has left the room, but I also just want to put on the record that this government has been committed to bringing Yazidi women here. The previous government brought three, and we have brought 1,000. Those women, when they get to Canada, do indeed require trauma support. Unfortunately, the previous government cut health care for refugees, and we've reinstated it, so those women do have the opportunity to get the health care and the trauma support they need. I just wanted to get that on the record.

We've had a lot of talk about why we've seen this surge at the border, and one of the things that's come up repeatedly is a tweet. Mr. Scheer, the Conservative Party leader, said that that this whole wave started when the Prime Minister tweeted that all are welcome. The new premier in Ontario said this mess was 100% the result of the federal government and that the federal government should foot 100% of the bills. We've had a minister of the crown responsible for immigration in Ontario make reference to a tweet.

Do all of you think that doctoring this photograph to make it into a tweet is in any way whatsoever helpful in the debate that we're having around asylum seekers coming here? To take something like this, which the Conservative Party did, and put it out on social media, do you think it is helpful in the debate and to what we're seeing in terms of the public perception of asylum seekers who are coming to Canada?

I'll put it out to any of you.

● (1550)

Mr. Alex Neve: I am aware of the image that you've just shared. Of course, there are multiple other images that have circulated in Canada and around the world that which are disparaging and/or undermining refugee protection. To all of that, we would absolutely say "no". There clearly is no place for that kind of messaging or imagery when it comes to refugee protection.

I think with all social issues it is incumbent upon public officials to be very responsible in how they engage in public debate, what images they share, and what messages they convey. But there's absolutely no question that when it comes to refugees and refugee claimants, there's an increased vulnerability. There's a real volatility with respect to the public debate, and I think it is incumbent on public officials to go 10 steps further in questioning and second-guessing the imagery and statements they make.

It takes us back to the earlier debate about the use of the word "illegal" as well, a debate that I do not at all agree is just a matter of semantics. I think it is unfortunate that a number of officials, including our own Minister of Immigration, as was pointed out earlier, have used the word "illegal" at unfortunate times around this debate. I would love to see a commitment from everyone in public life, no matter what political party they come from, to shy away from that and to make an absolute commitment not to use that terminology.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you.

Does anyone else want to add to that?

Go ahead.

Ms. Amy Casipullai: We noticed in a recent *Toronto Star* poll—and because it is a newspaper, those polls are not exactly reliable—that there was a definite shift from the kinds of attitudes that we saw among the public a couple of years ago when there was so much enthusiasm to sponsor Syrian refugees. This particular reader poll had 85% of people saying, "We don't want refugees in Canada", or words to that effect. That kind of trend is quite alarming for OCASI because of the public education we're doing in trying to build positive attitudes towards refugees and people's investments in working with refugee communities to make sure they get jobs and housing, to ensure that they are part of our communities.

It's particularly unhelpful when this is repeated in the media, because we then have to do so much more work to counter not just the language, but also so much misinformation about who is a refugee, why they are fleeing, and why they deserve safety in Canada.

Ms. Pam Damoff: I know that my community, in my riding of Oakville North—Burlington, which encompasses the communities of both Oakville and Burlington, has been very welcoming to refugees and has really worked to make sure that people have become part of the community. I feel blessed to be in a community that has welcomed those who are vulnerable and have sought to come to Canada. You're absolutely right about where there has been a shift, because of language and images, in how people are perceiving the most vulnerable who are coming to our country.

Is our system working? Is it compassionate, and is it organized?

Ms. Anne Woolger: Once again, I think there's a lot of hope for it. I do want to say that certainly we in Toronto appreciate the $11 million sent our way, and we are hopeful that more may be coming. I think it's a good start. I know that in Ontario it is a challenge.

Ms. Pam Damoff: You mentioned Toronto. There have been numbers bandied about that around 45% of people in the housing in Toronto are refugees, but Toronto doesn't track whether it's an asylum seeker, newcomer, or refugee. How could you possibly know that it was 45%?

Ms. Anne Woolger: There is some challenge. I'm not with the City of Toronto—

Ms. Pam Damoff: No, no, I know you're not.

Ms. Anne Woolger: —so you'll have to speak with them. They're a sanctuary city, so in terms of the way they track people, it's a bit difficult.

Ms. Pam Damoff: They have a "don't ask, don't tell" policy, do they not?

Ms. Anne Woolger: Yes.

Ms. Pam Damoff: So it would be impossible to know.

Ms. Anne Woolger: It would be.

What I can say—

The Chair: I'm afraid I need to cut you off there.

Ms. Anne Woolger: —sure—is that things go through ebbs and flows, and I feel they're getting better.

● (1555)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Maguire.

Mr. Larry Maguire (Brandon—Souris, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I, too, want to welcome all of our witnesses here today, and I am very glad that you've had the opportunity to bring your experiences to us. We've been very astute on our side here, talking about the tracking. My colleague, Ms. Rempel, was talking about that earlier, that we are very compassionate about making sure that there are opportunities for refugees in Canada.

I, too, was on that travelling committee in Africa in early June with several of my colleagues on the committee from both sides of the House, and that was a very good opportunity to see how our system works.

I know that all we're saying is that we just want to see a plan, a costed plan from the government on how the process is going to work. I think Ms. Damoff just made the point that they don't know where they are. You don't rely on the housing people in Toronto to find out where these people are. You do it through the refugee claimant system that comes into Canada, and then you keep track of the people as to where they are, so that they can go through the proper channels that we have in the system to become legal refugees in this country after they've crossed. There is no doubt about that.

I just want to say that anyone who doubts the compassion of anyone here needs to talk to me about it because I have refugees in my own family who have established here in Canada and have gone on to become great citizens, so I have no qualms about speaking out. Some of you talked about the quality of the individuals who are coming into the country. That's not the big issue. We just need to know what the plan is and where the government is at.

We've had testimony today from two ministers so far and a parliamentary secretary, and we're about to have testimony from another one, who have not even given us the same kind of definitive plan that we were able to get from the minister in Ontario. She knew how many dollars they were asking for and what the breakdown was. We haven't even been able to get that out of the federal government.

That's part of why we asked for this committee meeting, and I appreciate the opportunity to be here in the summer to do this.

One of the things we learned when we were in Uganda is that there are 1.4 million refugees in Uganda alone, out of 64 million refugees in the world. We are looking at almost twice the Canadian population, so this isn't about a resettlement process. A lot of those people don't want to leave their home countries. Most of them don't want to leave their home countries, but they've been forced to, as we've heard as well. I put that out there.

Part of our role in that process was to look at the visa application centres and their function. Whether they are student, worker, or visitor visas, there is a process that people go through there as well before they come to Canada. That's just one more benchmark, but that's through the legal process.

What we're looking at is having a study here that will deal with some of the situations that we're faced with on a day-to-day basis.

I appreciate the comments by Mr. Reichhold on how the system works for the corporate sponsorships, the private ones you were talking about, and also the grassroots groups, because I also know people who have taken it upon themselves in some of my own local communities—church groups, community groups, and towns in fact —to integrate refugees. I've been there with them when they have got off the plane to take them to their local communities and integrate them with work, getting the kids into school, and those sorts of things.

We've seen situations where there are problems in Quebec with day care in a number of those areas, and with getting them into.... There are time frames that we need to be dealing with.

Just in closing I want to say that I believe we need some kind of a process, and the visa application process is one. That's through normal channels, though, so we need to find a way for the governments to make it compassionate for those who are refugees who come into our country, and I don't think that the process we're going through now is the only answer for being compassionate. It's not compassionate to put them into areas where women and children are going to be housed for only a very short time, or to leave them out. First of all, they're in the cold in the winters. I think we need to be compassionate in those areas.

That's why I am asking for a report by this committee to Parliament so that the government can respond.

● (1600)

My colleague ran out of time on that, so I would just like to ask you the same question—

The Chair: I'm afraid you just did as well.

Mr. Larry Maguire: —if you feel that there is that opportunity.

The Chair: You're at the end of your five minutes.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Thank you.

The Chair: Sorry.

It's now 4 o'clock so I don't believe we have time for another witness. We will take a brief moment to suspend, and then we will reconvene the second hour in just a few moments.

● (1600)

(Pause)

● (1605)

The Chair: I'm calling the meeting back to order. This is the continuation of our third meeting for the study of the impact of irregular crossing of Canada's southern border.

Thank you, Ministers, for being with us today.

Thank you again,Minister Blair. It's a great baptism by fire for you as the new minister.

Thank you again, Minister Hussen. This is one of several appearances you have had before our committee on this topic as well as others, so we thank you again for joining us.

We're going to begin with your remarks. You have seven minutes.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen (Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship): Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It is always a pleasure to appear at this committee with my parliamentary colleagues.

As you know, our government remains firmly committed to abiding by Canada's international obligations, honouring our humanitarian commitments and upholding our laws regarding asylum claims, while at the same time, protecting the safety and security of Canadians.

[*English*]

Mr. Chair, our government has a clear plan in place that guides all our actions on irregular migration. Our six-pillar plan includes operational preparedness, border integrity, international obligations, co-operation with provinces and municipalities, outreach, and international engagement.

Our first pillar is to ensure that we are prepared. Predicting asylum and migration patterns is difficult, which is why we have a national operations plan in place, developed in collaboration with different government agencies, provinces, municipalities and non-profit organizations, to ensure that we can deal with any surges at any point along the border. Our professional departmental and security agencies are able to respond to various possible scenarios, wherever and whenever they occur.

The second pillar of our plan is security and border integrity. We have a clear and vigorous procedure in place to keep our border secure and Canadians safe. People who cross our borders irregularly are arrested and subject to a thorough security screening. And let me be very clear on this one: no one leaves a port of entry until that security screening is complete.

Third, Canadians expect of us that we will uphold our international obligations, which have been enshrined into our own Canadian laws since the 1970s. Canada respects its legal obligations, and people who are fleeing persecution have a right to claim asylum and a right to due process. Despite what certain colleagues continue to suggest, respecting our legal obligations to asylum claimants is not a choice; it is the law. We recognize that it is important to ensure that claims are processed quickly, so that those who are found to be in need of Canada's protection get to stay, and those who do not have a legitimate claim for Canada's protection are asked to leave and promptly removed. This is why we have invested $74 million in the Immigration and Refugee Board, which decides asylum claims. This funding will allow us to hire 249 new staff at the IRB, including 64 new decision-makers.

The fourth pillar in our plan is co-operation with provincial and municipal partners. We continue to work very closely with provinces and municipalities and all of our partners on issues such as contingency planning and housing, to ensure that an orderly process is in place for asylum claimants. For example, Quebec asked us to speed up work permits so that asylum seekers may have minimal impact on provincial social services. We listened and cut processing times for asylum seeker work permits from three months to three weeks.

Unfortunately, the new Ontario government has so far refused to play its part. We remain confident that we can still find a way to work together in upholding our laws and meeting our obligations. It's what Canadians expect of us, and I urge my colleagues in Ontario to come back to the table.

The fifth pillar of our plan is the intensive outreach campaign directed at impacted communities and populations. Irregular entry is not a shortcut or a free ticket to Canada, and we have delivered that message consistently and extensively both at home and abroad with real results. In fact, through members of Parliament and consulates and the Canadian embassy in Washington, we have engaged more than 600 key stakeholders in the past year to counter misinformation, explain how our asylum and immigration systems work, and warn of the risks associated with irregular entries.

Our sixth and final pillar is our international engagement. We have worked very closely with U.S. officials, and our government will continue to engage the U.S. government to prevent the misuse of U.S.-issued visas and to pursue the modernization of the safe third country agreement.

● (1610)

We also continue to work actively with key source countries and transit countries to deter illegal migration. Recently I travelled to Nigeria, where my counterparts agreed to help facilitate documents for those whose asylum claims have failed.

Mr. Chair, at this point I'd like to address our government's fiscal plan to deal with irregular migration. As you know, budget 2018 had already pledged $173.2 million to manage the increased number of people seeking asylum in Canada. These resources were taken into account to start the year. Subsequently, on June 1, the Government of Canada pledged an initial $50 million in additional funds to assist Quebec, Manitoba, and Ontario, the provinces that have borne the majority of the costs associated with housing asylum claimants. Of this amount $11 million will go directly to the City of Toronto.

As you know, the budget cycle is an open, transparent process whereby fellow parliamentarians have the opportunity to review the government's expenditures on an ongoing basis, determine how taxpayers' money is being spent, and to vote on our supplementary estimates accordingly. New resource requirements regarding irregular migration will be presented in the government's supplementary estimates.

Mr. Chair, with the additional investments in budget 2018 and the ongoing collaboration with our various partners, we've made significant progress in managing this situation effectively, and we are prepared for any potential future influxes of asylum claimants. With that said, I should note that the volume of asylum claimants crossing the border irregularly into Canada has gone down significantly. In June 2018 there were 1,263 irregular border crossings by people claiming asylum. This is the lowest monthly total recorded since June 2017. It is less than half the number of people who were intercepted in April of this year. This signals a continued decrease and is a positive development.

We recognize that movements of people are difficult to predict, but it is clear that as we implement our plan, it is having an impact. This is also why we will continue to work very closely with all of our partners, in particular the City of Toronto and the Provinces of Quebec and Manitoba, which are impacted most significantly by this issue. I already spoke about our wish to also work closely with the Province of Ontario.

Mr. Chair, we've also made significant refinements in our operations to prepare for future influxes of asylum claimants: the stand-up of a dedicated situation centre to manage issues horizontally; the development of a national operations plan to make sure we are able to respond to events quickly and efficiently; the introduction of new innovations such as mobile processing units and virtual decision-making models to ensure rapid and nimble responses to any new influxes; enhanced coordination and co-operation among all of our partners, including federal-provincial relations planning, most notably through the intergovernmental task force on irregular migration. We have fast-tracked work permit applications from all asylum claimants in order to alleviate the pressure on the social assistance budgets of provincial governments. We are working to develop a system of triage of asylum claims at the border to enhance our management abilities and also to move them to locations where they can best be housed and find temporary housing.

Mr. Chair, I want to be very clear with members of this committee and with Canadians that I'm confident we'll continue to work with all of our partners to effectively address this situation. Although it's difficult to predict future flows, as I indicated, we are working co-operatively and efficiently to deal with what is in front of us now—which is a challenge, but not a crisis—and to prepare for any future influxes.

In closing, I'd like to commend our front-line personnel at the RCMP, CBSA, as well as IRCC and the IRB, for their exemplary work. They have all performed their duties in a professional and highly effective manner to protect public safety while ensuring that we uphold our humanitarian responsibilities to treat vulnerable people with dignity and respect.

Mr. Chair, thank you once again for the opportunity for me to give this overview to members of this committee. I look forward to answering any questions that my honourable colleagues may have.

● (1615)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister. We'll have remarks from just one minister at this session of the meeting. I also welcome the deputy and officials, as well as those from Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness who are with us, and those from the agency. Questions may end up getting directed anywhere, but we're going to begin with Mr. Anandasangaree for seven minutes.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Scarborough—Rouge Park, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to both ministers for being here. Of course, Mr. Blair is a fellow Scarborough MP. All five Scarborough MPs are very proud of your role here with our government.

I just want to commence, Minister, with the fact that there's been some confusion in the language with respect to the use of the word "illegal". Can you clarify your position on this, please?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you very much, Mr. Anandasangaree. It gives me an opportunity to be clear and consistent on this.

Any individual crossing our border from the United States between ports of entry is committing an illegal act, crossing the border illegally; however, once that person claims asylum, then that charge is stayed pending the determination of his or her refugee claim. Once someone is on Canadian soil, the charge of crossing irregularly is stayed pending the determination of the asylum claim.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Can you just give us a sense of this? Throughout the day, the opposition has been asking different officials to predict the number of people who are expected here in the next few months, in the next few years, and also to budget based on this prediction. Can you tell us the practical difficulty in making such a prediction?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We are not the only country that receives asylum claimants. This is a global phenomenon. Canada is not immune to global migration patterns. We are seeing in the world now what is a record number of people on the move since the Second World War, and again, we're not immune to that. What our government is committed to doing is ensuring that we enforce Canadian law, but also meet our international obligations to continue to provide asylum to those who seek it, and doing so through an independent process that determines who requires asylum and who doesn't. Because of those trends, because of the fluctuations, not just between years, but even within a year, it's difficult to predict with any certainty how many people are going to show up at our border or claim asylum in a given year.

Having said that, we are seeing an increase in the number of people claiming asylum in many industrialized countries in the world, and that is why we've developed a national operations plan that has taken into account all of the lessons we have learned from last year to make sure that we are ready for any eventuality. As I've said, the numbers have decreased over the last number of months, and the trend is downward, but we're ready for any influxes.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Mr. Blair, you had a chance to visit Lacolle yesterday, and I believe you've already spoken to the ministers in Ontario, as well as Mayor Tory, I'm sure on a number of occasions, with respect to this. Can you advise us? First of all, are you satisfied with the plan we have? Second, do you believe that, going forward, there's the possibility of engaging all three levels of government toward a workable plan that will support all those who come here, as well as Canadians?

● (1620)

Hon. Bill Blair (Minister of Border Security and Organized Crime Reduction): I think it's not only possible, but absolutely essential that we work together. I think all three orders of government have a shared responsibility to uphold the law, to help this country fulfill its international obligations, and to serve all of our citizens by working collaboratively together. There are responsibilities that municipalities, provinces, territories, and the federal government share, and I think we are stronger and more effective when we work together. We have seen excellent co-operation, for example, on these very complicated files with the Province of Quebec, and we've had very, very productive discussions just in the past few months with the City of Toronto. I remain convinced that we can, and must, work collaboratively with all provinces, territories, and municipalities, all orders of government, so that we might all fulfill our responsibilities.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: If I may just add, I believe this year thus far 43% of those who've come to Canada have come to Ontario. The numbers over the last three years or so have been anywhere from 38% to 40%, so the net beneficiary of immigration, including refugees, is Ontario.

Could you tell us, first, why it's an economic imperative for a place like Ontario to ensure it supports those who are coming in, both as immigrants and refugees and, second, what the economic benefit is for the entire country because of these people coming here?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: That's a very important question. The fact of the matter is that our immigration system has always had room for both economic immigration, family class, and also refugees. In the past we've seen, when Canadians have responded generously to provide protection to those who are seeking protection, that those folks have eventually integrated into Canadian society and become upstanding citizens. If you look at the track record that Canada has with respect to its welcome of Vietnamese boat people, those people came to our country seeking protection, and Canadians responded generously. No one can argue today that the Vietnamese Canadian community has not integrated. They're exemplary citizens who are now, in turn, giving back and sponsoring other refugees, including Syrian refugees.

I think that studies done by not only the Canadian government but also the OECD and others have shown that all immigrants make a contribution to their host community. They fill labour market shortages. They bring skills and an entrepreneurial spirit to the host community. What we're saying to Ontario is that the issue of irregular migration is a challenge facing us, and we have an obligation, that Canadians expect of us, to work together to meet that challenge. These solutions are more easily arrived at when we work together.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Thank you, Minister.

If I may, Mr. Chair, perhaps you will indulge me here.

My family came here 35 years ago this year, as a result of incidents that took place the evening of July 23 and onwards for seven days in Sri Lanka, where thousands of Tamils were killed. For the record, I'd like to register my profound appreciation to this country and to you as minister acting in that capacity. I want to thank you for allowing me and thousands of others to come here. It was a very important moment for me personally.

Thank you for this opportunity.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Rempel.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Here, I will read you the following:

> It's not a matter of shopping for the country that you want; it's a matter of escaping the oppression that you face.

Minister Blair, would you agree with that statement?

Hon. Bill Blair: I think the purpose of seeking refuge is to escape from the threat of death or serious harm, so for those who come seeking refuge and who make claims, I think we have a responsibility in law to make sure that those claims are adjudicated according to due process and thoroughly.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

That statement was made by Deputy Prime Minister John Manley upon signing the safe third country agreement in 2002. That agreement was signed after Canada was in a very similar situation to today's. It was designed to prevent people from entering Canada and seeking asylum after they had already reached the United States.

Now, in a scrum today, Minister Goodale was asked if he intended to ask the Americans—because he had asserted that they wouldn't accept people back if we extended the agreement—and he said that he was waiting for the Americans to start the conversation. Was that an official invitation for the American government to start negotiations with you and Minister Goodale—whoever's in charge?

● (1625)

Hon. Bill Blair: First of all, I would not presume to interpret Minister Goodale's remarks—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: But you are in charge of this.

Hon. Bill Blair: —but I would invite Minister Hussen, who's been involved in those conversations, to respond, if you'd like.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Oh, no, Minister Blair, you are now in charge, and I am asking you questions. Welcome to committee. You are in charge of this—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Chair, may I respond, or...?

Hon. Michelle Rempel: —Minister Blair, so was that an official extension of an invitation to the United States to enter into negotiations with you to close the loophole in the safe third country agreement?

Hon. Bill Blair: I can advise this committee that I've had an opportunity to speak to both Minister Goodale and Minister Hussen about conversations they have had with their counterparts. Although I think it might be better for the committee if the minister were able to speak for himself—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I'm asking you. You're in charge now.

Hon. Bill Blair: —I can tell you that it's been communicated to me that—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: You're ostensibly in charge. So what do you do?

Hon. Bill Blair: It has been communicated to me that those conversations have been taking place with our counterparts in the United States. There is a process. You cannot unilaterally change an international agreement. We certainly can't do it—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Just yes or no, Minister Blair.

Hon. Bill Blair: —by changing a domestic law.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Minister Blair—

Hon. Bill Blair: It's a conversation that we have undertaken—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Chair, it is my time.

Hon. Bill Blair: —and will continue to undertake as appropriate.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Chair, point....

Minister Blair—

The Chair: Before you continue, I would just remind the whole committee that the witnesses may agree to answer a question, they may decline to answer a question, or they may refer that question to someone else who is a witness at the committee. That is long-established committee procedure.

I just remind all committee members that this is the right of everyone we invite as a witness.

Thank you.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

Minister Blair, was that an extension of an invitation? Would you extend an invitation to the American government to start a conversation on closing the loophole in the safe third country agreement?

Hon. Bill Blair: What I will undertake is to continue to work with Minister Goodale and Minister Hussen in conversations they have already undertaken in relationships they have already established.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

This morning, the parliamentary secretary to ESDC suggested that the "triage system" was designed to "redistribute the problem".

How many people will be redistributed from Quebec after entering at Roxham Road to Ontario shelters in the next 18 months?

Hon. Bill Blair: I can tell you that my understanding of the triage system is that it's to ensure that refugee claimants during the period —

Hon. Michelle Rempel: How many people will be triaged?

Hon. Bill Blair: —have the opportunity to be placed in a place where they are most likely to be successful, a safe place, so that the burden that may impact on communities—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Minister Blair, how many people will be triaged?

Your parliamentary secretary also said that further installments were going to be allocated. He couldn't tell us how much or how many, because he said that Immigration was in charge there, but now you're in charge. Your counterpart sitting beside you has rightly noted that parliamentarians have the right to scrutinize expenses.

We have found out today that there are going to be future installments, but we don't know for how many people or for what purpose or under what circumstances. How many people who have crossed at Roxham Road are you planning to house in hotels over the next 18 months?

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Chair, if I may, I'd like to refer that question to the officials, who would have a far more accurate answer.

Mr. Mike MacDonald (Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic and Program Policy, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Chair, the triage concept that we're currently designing would see us triage 100% of the arrivals—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: How many?

Mr. Mike MacDonald: —100% of the arrivals.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: How many? Quantifiably, precisely, how many people are you planning to put in hotels after they've crossed at Roxham Road in the next 18 months?

Mr. Mike MacDonald: I'm sorry, I was answering the first question.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: The question was how could we know this? We need to have a plan at this point in time. You've got 800 people who are about to be moved out of shelters to parts unknown. You need to know. You have made a policy decision not to close the loophole in the safe third country agreement and we need to know if you are adequately budgeting for the integration.

The entire pillar that you've outlined here on working with the provinces talks nothing about the long-term integration costs of people who are here on humanitarian grounds. You've forgotten the opposite side of the coin; you've forgotten that it's not just about processing them at Roxham Road or taking a picture with them. You have to figure out how you're going to pay for their needs.

Minister Blair, how many people are you anticipating you will have to put in a hotel in the next 18 months?

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Hussen.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Chair, the plan that we have in place is not a new plan. It's been in place for—

● (1630)

Hon. Michelle Rempel: How many people are you planning to put in a hotel, Minister?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Chair, if I may be able—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: No. I need to know this. We have gone through hours of meetings with you and I still don't understand how many people are coming through and how you're planning to pay for them.

The Chair: I'll just remind the member that a question is normally placed through the chair, and if you'd like to do that, it would be helpful.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair, on decorum. You raised the right of the minister to answer questions or not. This is the umpteenth committee meeting that we have had. We have 800 people who are about to be evicted from a shelter or college dormitories in Ontario, and I've had three ministers plus a new minister who doesn't know what his job is, countless department officials, supplementary estimates, the budgetary process, a committee of the whole, Order Paper questions, and we still don't know how many people they are projecting to come in and how they are budgeting for these expenses. That is not compassionate, because we are in situations where, outside of the supplementary estimates process, they're having to spend money piecemeal to put people in hotels. We're not talking about how we're going to put together an integration plan for language training.

I am just, at this point in time, speaking of decorum. I cannot believe that we have ministers in front of this committee again with no numbers and projections, and they must have this to the Parliamentary Budget Officer by Thursday.

So I'll ask my question again.

The Chair: I am just going to say that it is not a point of order. It moved into debate. Is there a point of order over here?

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Mr. Chair, I'd like to—

The Chair: I don't believe it was a point of order. I believe it was continued debate.

Ms. Rempel.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Minister Blair—

Hon. Bill Blair: If I may offer a response to—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: No, I am asking a question. I will ask you a question. Do you plan to comply with the Parliamentary Budget Officer's request—

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair, you've already indicated that questions need to be directed through you, and I believe the last intervention indicated that that question was directly asked of Minister Blair.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Let me rephrase that.

Mr. Chair, this is my time and I will ask a question of the minister.

Through you, Mr. Chair, will the minister comply with the Parliamentary Budget Officer's request to provide by Thursday projections of the number of people they anticipate coming through the border in the next 18 months? The request is for five years of information, and if it is due on Thursday, why don't they have that information here after we have already approved a $22,000 budget for this study, which the government members are unwilling to provide a report for?

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Chair, I can advise you that this financial data has been compiled and will be provided to the Parliamentary Budget Officer in the coming days, as required.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Why hasn't this been provided to our committee for review? Why hasn't this been provided to the Ontario provincial government? Why is there secrecy and no plan?

Hon. Bill Blair: Again, the member asked if the information is being provided to the PBO, and the answer is yes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: If it's been compiled, will the minister table it to committee by the end of the day?

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Rempel.

Thank you, Minister.

Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Welcome to all of the witnesses, including the two ministers.

I want to get back to this one point with Minister Hussen on the word "illegal" versus "irregular". I think this is a very central point. We just heard from a number of expert witnesses about the importance of using the right terminology, and about how when people call asylum seekers "illegals" they're dehumanizing them and their dignity, and how doing so has other repercussions as well.

At committee, Minister, on March 19 you agreed that you use those words, "illegal" and "irregular" interchangeably. I believe that is wrong.

Today I just heard you also, at one point in your statement, refer to migrants as "illegal migrants" and I just can't tell you how disturbed I am about that, Minister.

We also had Minister MacLeod, who appeared before us, and she actually said that she is using the word "illegal" because she took a page from you and that's why she is using that.

Once and for all, can we move forward with the right terminology? You are the immigration minister. IRPA, the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, states clearly under section 133 that asylum seekers who cross over, directly or indirectly, are actually not committing an offence. So will you please use the right terminology and say clearly on the public record that it is wrong for immigration purposes to say that asylum seekers who cross over irregularly are "illegals"?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I never said that asylum seekers are illegal. That's language that's being used by the Government of Ontario, and I haven't used that language.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Well actually, you did. If you go back to read the committee evidence from March 19, you were asked that specific question.

● (1635)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I was referring to the act of crossing the border. I wasn't referring to the asylum seekers themselves. There is a distinction there.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Well, okay.

You're saying that for CBSA, the act of crossing the border is illegal, but then once they cross over and they make it clear to say that they are seeking asylum, they are not committing a criminal offence.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Correct.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Will you say that?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Well, I've said it in my statement.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay.

So let me ask you this. In your statement you also said, the charges are "stayed pending...asylum claims". What charges?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: The charge of crossing the border irregularly.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Asylum seekers, when they cross over seeking asylum at irregular border crossings, are not charged. Their asylum claim is pending the IRB determination. Do you not know that, Minister?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I do know that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Then why would you say that charges are pending the asylum claim?

When you make these comments, Minister, you are conflating the issue. You are stripping asylum seekers of their dignity. You are dehumanizing them.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I haven't done that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: You are implying that somehow—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: In fact, I have done the opposite.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: —they're acting in an illegal manner—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I have not done that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: —and it does not help this conversation. It does not help this approach, Minister.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Okay.

Will you give me an opportunity to clear the air? I have not done that. In fact, I have gone out of my way to make sure that I defend the right of people to claim asylum in Canada. I have defended their humanity and I have fought back against those who would seek to dehumanize or delegitimize them.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, Minister, but that is not really the case. If you're honest with yourself and you go back and look at Hansard, time and again in the comments that you have made you have used the words "illegal" and "irregular" interchangeably, to the detriment of the asylum seekers.

Now I want to turn to another issue. On the safe third country agreement, we just heard the story of Mr. Seidu Mohammed, who had to cross over. He risked life and limb to do so. He had other people who crossed over irregularly as well. As someone who has lived that journey, today he has called for the government to suspend the safe third country agreement. Is that something you will consider doing?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'd like to begin by acknowledging and sympathizing with individuals who are seeking asylum, who are fleeing war and persecution.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, Minister, I have only seven minutes, so could you just answer my question quickly?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I understand and I'm going to get to the answer.

It's important for us to acknowledge the humanity and the dignity of these people. The safe third country agreement is premised on a principle supported by the United Nations, which is that people should claim asylum in the first safe country that they land in. According to the analysis of IRCC, as well as of the UNHCR, the United States is a safe country for asylum seekers.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay, so you take the point of view that the U. S. is a safe country for inland asylum seekers.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Correct.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: All right.

The United States has a standing policy under which it will not accept any applications for gender-based asylum claims based on domestic violence and gang violence. That is its standing policy at this point in time. Inland asylum seekers who show up at its border seeking asylum because of domestic violence or gang violence will be automatically rejected. Do you think that's safe for asylum seekers?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'll answer your question by stating that we conduct analysis of the U.S. domestic asylum system. Regarding the policy direction you referred to, we are analyzing the impact of it on the U.S. domestic asylum system. As of today, the U.S. asylum system continues to provide due process, it continues to provide appeal rights, and it actually has acceptance rates comparable to Canada's and many other industrialized countries' that accept asylum seekers.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Aside from the fact that the U.S. has a standing policy that rejects asylum seekers who are fleeing domestic violence or gang violence, it also has more than 400 children who have been separated from their parents, whose parents have left the U.S., have been deported. Effectively, those children are orphans. That is the current situation. I don't know how, Minister, and I am sad to hear you say that—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Well, that is wrong. We've been very clear on that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: —you consider the U.S. a safe country.

On the issue around plans or lack thereof, really, the government has taken an ad hoc approach to dealing with the situation, and it's inadequate. On the question about a plan, will you consider changing the immigration levels plan for the protected persons stream, from 16,000 to double that, so that you can properly accommodate the influx we're faced with today?

● (1640)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: That's a very good question.

The Chair: Be very brief, please.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: In anticipation of the rise in the global migration patterns as well as those seeking asylum, we did proactively, as a government, raise our protected persons allocation by 4,000. It shows that we were ready with a plan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: No, your number's at 16,000. Will you actually adjust that to reflect the current reality today?

The Chair: I'm afraid I need to end there. Thank you.

Moving to Mr. Fragiskatos and Ms. Mendès, who are sharing this time, would you like me to tell you when you're at three and a half minutes, or can you manage that?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): I think I can manage that, but jump in if I can't, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: No one else has been able to.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Okay, well then please jump in, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister Hussen, for being here; and Minister Blair, for coming back; and the officials again for coming back today.

Minister Hussen, my question goes to you. Earlier today we heard from the mayor of Chatham, Randy Hope, about how the asylum issue is actually, in his eyes, an opportunity for communities like Chatham. He talked about the demand for labour that exists in the community, labour that doesn't always require previous experience or high levels of education. Today, incidentally, the C.D. Howe Institute put out a briefing note called "Canada can benefit economically from the asylum seeker surge".

I think all of this is relevant to the discussion. As I say, Mayor Hope sees an opportunity, not a crisis here but an opportunity, in the challenge before us. What do you say to mayors like him, like Mayor Hope, who lead a community that has been...? I'm not sure if you know a lot about the history of Chatham, but it's very close to London, Ontario. It has always shown a welcoming hand to refugees, going back all the way to the times of the underground railroad, and accepting many Syrian refugees. Mayor Hope is quite open to this. He sees it from a compassionate perspective, but he also, again, sees it from an economic perspective.

I know you've talked about many work permits being issued. If you could, centre on the whole issue of communities like his that see a real chance here for economic growth and jobs—jobs that are not being filled.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: The fact of the matter is that this is not a crisis; this is a challenge that many countries face, including Canada. We remain committed, as a government, to making sure that we apply Canadian laws and meet our international obligations. The opposition feels that we have to choose one or the other, but we feel that we can do both, and we have done both.

Second, we remain committed, as a country and as a government, to making sure that we don't turn back people who are seeking protection. We don't turn them back to persecution, torture, and death, because we have signed international conventions to make sure we don't do that. When we have responded as a country and as communities to provide protection to those folks, we have seen the contributions that they've been able to make as new citizens. We also, as part of Canadian law, make sure that those who are not in need of protection are also removed, that protection is only accorded to those who can prove their need for refugee protection.

I commend the mayor of Chatham and other municipal leaders for stepping up to assist these people, while they wait for their hearings, to be able to support themselves. The majority of asylum seekers want to work while they wait for their hearings, because they and we don't want folks to be a burden or to put pressures on provincial social programs.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Mr. Chair, is there more time?

The Chair: You have 15 seconds.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I yield it to my friend Ms. Mendès.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair and Peter.

Welcome to both of you. Welcome, Mr. Blair, again.

I would like to go back to a comment made by the member for Calgary Nose Hill about the budgetary issues around welcoming, or facilitating if you wish, the due process for asylum claimants. The member claims that this would be outside of the budgetary forecasts that were done. I believe that, no, we always have a margin within our budgets to deal with unplanned cases. It's almost the same issue with the question of housing for the 800 people in Toronto who have to leave dormitories.

First of all, I don't think asylum is ever a planned issue for anybody. Nobody plans to seek asylum. They're always forced into that situation. As a country that is seen by others as a haven and a welcoming place for asylum seekers, well, we can have an idea from year to year that we are going to welcome 15,000 or 20,000, more or less, but we can't really give an exact number of how many we're going to receive every day, every week, or every month. We have to keep a certain flexibility and capacity to adjust to whatever needs present themselves at the border in this instance.

Would you address the budgetary issue, Minister Hussen, just to reassure our colleagues that this is all within the current budget and that it's not outside of the—

● (1645)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Absolutely.

We've budgeted $173.2 million towards irregular migration. One of the key pieces in that allocation is $74 million for the Immigration and Refugee Board precisely so that claims can be heard faster, so that we can have a much fairer, faster, and final system. That's important. Folks who have a legitimate claim for refugee status can get faster decisions made and then move on with their lives. Those who do not have a legitimate claim for Canada's protection can also be removed faster.

I think what our government disagrees on fundamentally with the opposition.... They're beating around the bush on this. They're not coming out and saying it, but they don't fundamentally believe we should live up to our international obligations with respect to asylum claimants. These are international obligations that we have signed on to, and that are now embedded in Canadian law, so providing due process to these people is part of Canadian law. It's not a choice, as you've heard from the provincial minister and others. As a country, we are obligated to make sure that if an individual claims asylum, we accord them due process.

Having said that, as we move forward we do have a plan in place based on last year's experience. That plan is premised not only on further investments in the IRB, but also on collaborating with the provinces, making sure that asylum seekers are able to support themselves by providing them with work permits so they are able to work while they wait for their hearings.

The Chair: Thank you.

That's it.

I would like to take the prerogative as chair to ask one question. It's not really tongue in cheek, but it's on this economic issue.

We are hearing about a need for provinces to have some sharing of the burden and the willingness of the government to.... Have any of the provinces offered to reimburse the federal government for the costs of refugee processing due to the huge economic advantage they will receive over 10 or 20 years from the likes of people around this table who have been received as refugees?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Chair, no—

The Chair: Not yet.

Thank you.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: —the provinces haven't really been broached that, but it's a good question.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: It wasn't totally in jest. We think about an economic balance. I'm an accountant. We think about the balance sheet.

Mr. Poilievre, for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, CPC): Thank you very much.

Mr. Minister, I would like to know how many people have crossed the border illegally since your government took office.

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: I'll ask the officials for totals, so we can give you —

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You don't know these numbers, you who have been appointed the minister responsible for borders and who is responsible for this issue?

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: Actually, you've asked about things that took place before I assumed these responsibilities, so I am asking for information from the officials. I now have that information in front of me.

The asylum claims by type, as totalled in 2017, was 50,864, and so far from January 1 to July 10, 2018, there has been a total of 11,408 irregular asylum claims.

Ms. Pam Damoff: A point of order, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Did you say that there were 50,000 people in 2017?

[*English*]

The Chair: I have a point of order by Ms. Damoff.

Ms. Pam Damoff: The member asked how many were coming here illegally, and I'm just wondering about this. We've had a lot of discussion about illegal versus irregular. That was the question. I'm not sure that was the answer we got.

● (1650)

Hon. Bill Blair: I may then clarify this, because I wasn't picking that up from the translation. Let me be very clear then. The irregular refugee claimants—if that was in fact the question—for 2017 were 19,002, and so far in 2018 from January 1 to July 10, which precedes my appointment, the irregular migration has been 11,408.

The Chair: Okay.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Excellent.

Mr. Minister, that means that 30,000 people have crossed the U.S.-Canada border illegally since your government took office.

Earlier today, you stated that, during your visit to Saint-Bernard-de-Lacolle, you saw an orderly process taking place.

Do you think the fact that 30,000 people have crossed the border illegally can be described as orderly?

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: Thank you, Mr. Poilievre.

What I was referring to was the processing of irregular refugee claimants, asylum seekers who have entered the country. I had the opportunity at Lacolle to witness a very professional and seamless process conducted by the RCMP, CBSA, and IRCC, where all of those agencies were working well and collaboratively together. I saw an excellent effort by the RCMP, for example, to conduct investigations to ensure that there is no criminality or risk to the security of Canada. They were doing an excellent job, and then there was a very orderly transition of claimants into the hands of CBSA and then the IRCC. That's what I was referring to.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You describe as orderly an act that your government said was illegal. The Prime Minister and the minister who was here have said that crossing the border is illegal. I find it difficult to reconcile the words "illegal" and "orderly", which you are combining today, and I think Canadians, 70% of whom believe your government has no plan, will agree. Earlier today, Ms. Rempel asked you which organizations report directly to you as minister. But you had no answer for her.

Given that you have since had the opportunity to study this issue at length, I would like to know if you can now tell us which organizations report directly to you, as minister.

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: Again, at the present time no agencies report directly to me. I am working on this issue, working very collaboratively with my colleagues across a number of ministries, including the Minister of Immigration and the Minister of Public—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: The CBSA doesn't report to you?

Hon. Bill Blair: It does not.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: The RCMP does not report to you?

Hon. Bill Blair: No, it does not.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: So you're responsible for protecting the border, and the border agency doesn't report to you.

Hon. Bill Blair: Not directly, no.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: So, it reports to you indirectly.

Hon. Bill Blair: No, I'm working with the minister to whom it does report, the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: If the agencies responsible for this issue don't report to you, then what do you do as minister?

Hon. Bill Blair: I have been given a responsibility to work across a number of different ministries to address the challenges we face in dealing with irregular border crossers—those who are seeking asylum—to ensure that we work collaboratively not only within our own government, but also with the provinces and territories, the municipalities, and other stakeholders to manage this issue.

The Chair: I'm afraid I need to end it there. Thank you.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: If I could just conclude, Mr. Chair, the fact that none of the relevant agencies actually report to you, Mr. Blair, suggests to Canadians that your appointment was actually more of a political statement rather than a practical fact.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Poilievre.

Mr. Whelan, for five minutes.

● (1655)

Mr. Nick Whalen (St. John's East, Lib.): This is a great place for me start because earlier in the day a question was asked, and it was sort of asked again, of Minister Blair, about what his role is. He comes with an incredible wealth of experience in intergovernmental relations. He's come off a huge file, helping shepherd the cannabis legislation through both houses of our Parliament, which was a huge endeavour.

Could you just explain to the committee what you are bringing to the table, what expertise you have, to further reassure Canadians that we're bolstering our team and how this is important for the Government of Canada to get right.

Hon. Bill Blair: Thank you very much, Mr. Whalen, for your kind words.

I have, frankly, four decades of experience, and 10 as a chief of police in a large metropolitan centre. I've had the opportunity over the course of that career—and certainly as you've already indicated—to manage rather complex files. The cannabis legislation, just as an example, was legislation that had an impact on multiple ministries. In that role I answered directly to the Minister of Justice, the Minister of Health, and the Minister of Public Safety, and also had a great deal of involvement with a number of other federal ministries. I worked with senior officials and the governments of all of the provinces and territories and with municipalities across the country, as well as engaged with first nations and other indigenous communities, because of the complexity of this file. There are a number of files that are managed within the government where it was felt that I could be of some assistance to the ministers in continuing to work and improve some of those processes to ensure cross-ministry collaboration on these important issues—and perhaps, most importantly, because these issue are important to Canadians. The issues that I have been tasked with relating to border security, the irregular crossers who are seeking asylum, and issues around organized crime and gun violence are all issues of concerns to Canadians, and which have, frankly, an impact on many ministers.

Mr. Nick Whalen: I think Canadians look forward to your contributions, and, of course, I think the opposition looks forward to your mandate letter, which I'm sure will be out soon.

Before I give the last word to the minister, I just want to thank the witnesses for coming today to help combat some of the misinformation and to help reassure Canadians that the situation is well managed, it's secure, and that we're meeting both our legal and our international obligations. I think that was clear from all of the testimony today.

I would also like to thank the guest members who joined the Liberal team today for their expertise on security, communities and housing, the issues in Quebec, and also international human rights. I think we needed to bolster our team today to make sure we took full advantage of who was appearing before us.

On the issue as to what report comes out of the study, I think we'll leave those important questions to the regular committee, which determines its own agenda, when we meet in the fall. We have now had nine great meetings on this very important topic, and in each case it seems that the department has been a couple of steps ahead of where some of the recommendations coming from this committee were going anyway.

In terms of the six-pillar plan of the government, I'm hoping that the minister could provide some final remarks on it, maybe focusing on a couple of issues that did come out today. One was modernizing the safe third country agreement. There were some discussions here about modernizing that agreement, and I'm wondering whether or not the government is open to modernizing it.

In terms of the timelines for processing, we heard a suggestion today of six months. The U.S. has 180 days for a determination—it's their benchmark—and 45 days to hear.... I know that the IRB is separate from your department, but if there are things that we're working toward in that regard, we would love to know about them and what the target is. Thank you.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Number one, on the issue of the safe third country agreement, it's a bilateral agreement. We have expressed our viewpoint to the United States. Like any other agreement that's almost a decade and a half old, it requires a second look to see how we can modernize it to take advantage of developments that have been made not only in technology but also in information sharing. How can we benefit from the full spirit of the agreement by harnessing those developments?

On the issue of what the government is trying to do, what we're trying to do and what we've effectively done is to make sure that we've learned the lessons from last year. We have a national operations plan in place, which has been tested on the ground with different players.

Number two is that we collaborate to make sure there's an orderly process in place.

Number three is that asylum seekers have come to Canada in the past. The opposition is suggesting or pretending that this is a new phenomenon. It's not. In 2008, under their watch, we had 30,000 asylum seekers.

The fact of the matter is that we have laws in place to deal with this. Our system is working. The IRB has invested to make sure there are an additional 64 decision-makers and more than 185 staff to further speed up the decision-making process so that Canada can continue to meet its obligations. Despite the rhetoric and fearmongering by the opposition, we remain committed to making sure that we have a place in our hearts and our immigration system for those who are seeking protection. We will not let fearmongering and divisive politics deter us from standing up for the rights of asylum seekers to claim asylum.

That being said, it's part of our law to make sure that if you have no claim for asylum in Canada, you're removed.

● (1700)

The Chair: Thank you, Ministers.

Thank you to all of our officials.

Thank you to the staff and the members of the committee.

The meeting is adjourned.

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